

Coming Into Iowa in 1837

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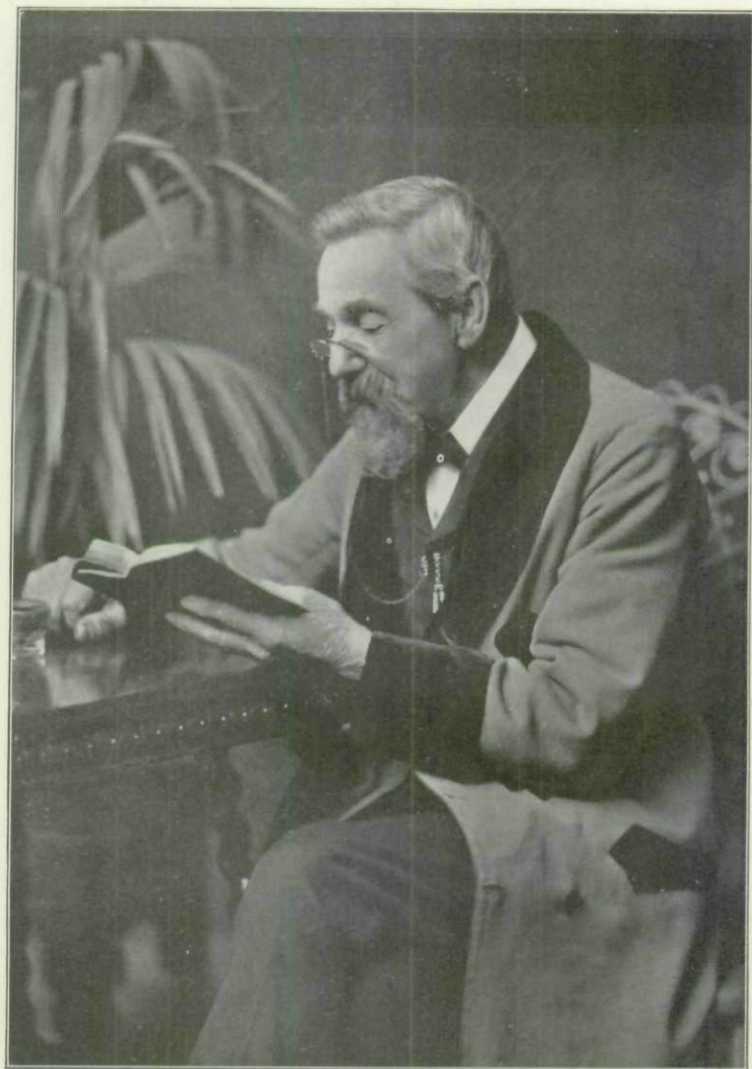
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Yours Truly
Geo C Duffield

GEORGE C. DUFFIELD.

A pioneer settler of Van Buren county, and one of the founders of the Iowa State Agricultural Society.

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COMING INTO IOWA IN 1837.

BY GEORGE C. DUFFIELD.

On the 9th day of March, 1837, James and Margaretta Duffield, with their eight children, arrived at Appanoose, on the left bank of the Mississippi river. On the right bank was Fort Madison. Samuel Swearingen and wife, with their seven children, were the only persons there who were acquainted with the Duffields before they reached this point, but an hour's meeting between men in those days was enough to make of them fast friends. A number of families were there that morning, all having waited over night to be ferried across. The experience of the Duffield family was the experience of all the others, and I will try to give an idea of it. It is as clear in my mind as if sixty-five years had rolled back and I was a boy again in buck-skin breeches and muskrat cap—with precious little more—in the camp of immigrants at Appanoose.

We camped at a tavern the evening we reached the river; and camped is the name for it, because our mother and Mrs. Swearingen, with the girls, were the only ones who slept in the house. The men and boys cuddled into the hay ricks and under the wagons. The next morning we drove to the edge of the water. Our wagon was driven on to a flatboat. This boat was about 30 feet long and 12 feet wide. There were two sets of row-locks on each side, one man to each oar. A man stood at the stern with a long steering oar and guided the boat. Getting on the boat was quite a job, for there were a great many families waiting to be taken over,

and each took its turn. Each family would be numbered, and when that number was called would be put aboard as quickly as possible, those remaining being only too glad to lend a hand in order to hurry their turn along. Each man who crossed helped to row. There was but one boat, and it took a greater part of a day to get our party over. The rapid current carried us down stream, and with the best management it was nearly always necessary for the men to jump ashore when the bank was reached, either in coming over or going back, and tow the boat back up stream to the landing.

At last we were over. "Gwine to the Ioway settlement?" we would be asked. "Yes; whar mought the trail be?" in response. "Leadin' out 'twixt them big bluffs, thar," pointing the way a mile from the river. The Iowa "settlement" was then but a small part of our present State, and still a part of Wisconsin Territory.

As the boat came to the shore on its different trips, men and boys would be busy reloading the wagons. Axeltrees were tarred, linchpins carefully adjusted; feather beds, blankets, pots and skillets, the axes and rifles loaded in. These were indispensable, and there were few other things so considered, and really few other things to care for. "Dick" and "Buck," the patient, faithful oxen, were yoked and hitched to the four-wheeled wagon, and "Jule," an old blind mare, was hitched to the "pint" of the tongue. This wagon had a bed with "over-jets" above the wheels, and hand-shaved bows, with cover, making a roomy and comfortable conveyance. The women were in supreme possession of this wagon, with a man or boy to drive. "Bright" and "Berry," the second yoke, drew the two-wheeled cart, and in it were the few rude farming tools, and what riding was done by any boy large enough to keep pace afoot with an ox, was on this cart. None of the time were all riding, and some of the time all walked.

After reaching the hills or bluffs, we were amazed at their steepness and size. The trail led in and out to the head of

a ravine that ran in from the prairie. It was a hard climb. Yet when we reached the more level ground we found a mere trail. Every foot of the way was on wild prairie sod which was hardly killed even where the hoofs of the oxen and wheels of the wagons trampled it, and between the tracks was a row of tall dead grass never broken, and as high as that on either side of the trail. One might think that this would make a good road. So it might at almost any other season. But most roads are poor in March of any year. These roads in March, 1837—when nearly every day was rainy, were soon cut up, and the soft, rich soil let the hoofs and wheels down to the stalling point—were the very worst. How many times did every one of the party have to get out, and nearly every article be unloaded! At such a time it was lucky there were large families. It took father and eldest sons to goad the oxen and encourage "Jule;" mother and each of the younger ones to carry a load apiece of the things taken from the wagon, and if father or larger sons could be spared from their tasks, it was to pry and push over or through quagmire after quagmire, until night overtook the tired company, sometimes not more than a mile from the place of their early morning start. It might be thought that the trail could be left and new ways taken. But when this was tried it was found that it took not more than one wagon to ruin the track, and not a rod of the way over which we came had not thus been cut up by others in our situation.

In those days I think every traveler coming west from Fort Madison toward West Point stopped at Pittman's. We had worried, and worked, and tugged, until man and beast were tired out. Patience and strength were well nigh exhausted, and in the rain our party drew up at Pittman's door at dark. Mother and Mrs. Swearingen were crying out of discouragement, and what mother did was none too bad for every child she had to do, and hardly so for father. Lewis Pittman had settled on the trail before there was any travel west. In 1837 he had a very well improved farm. He had

a good double cabin, log stable and some other outbuildings. He had a good sized family, and yet Swearingen's nine and ours of ten were taken in that night. And when our bedraggled troop marched into the large room where the big fire-place blazed, it was with the feeling that it was housed in the palace of a lord. A meal was prepared before the fire-place, and without other lights than the flaring chunks, though candles were used in the other room. We were fed as became a generous host and hungry guests. And when the table was cleared away, and the party gathered around the fire to exchange the experiences and reminiscences common to their lives, it was a scene that I shall not forget. Swearingens and Pittmans and Duffields; three couples with their broods; no more than six chairs in the whole house; the little ones at their mothers' feet, scorching their faces and nodding their tired heads; the larger ones at play in the shadows at the rear, and the girls and boys in their teens, shy and bashful, sat apart from the group, yet not near each other, neither interested in the talk of their elders nor offering to visit among themselves. Then came the retiring time. If that household required no more than six chairs in its waking hours, where had it room for twenty-five or thirty persons to sleep?

I have detailed life at the Pittman home up to retiring time exactly as I experienced it. It was but one of the early homes, and just the same as "Jimmie" Duffield's became in the summer and fall of 1837, and continued the entire year of 1838.

We staid at the Pittmans' several days resting and waiting for better weather. West Point, four miles beyond, was reached in a day. There was a stop, after leaving West Point, at Mr. Long's. His was the only family between West Point and Utica, where William Goodall lived. Now we began to think we were nearing our journey's end. Utica prairie was known far and wide. Here the trail leading on up the divide was left by those going in other directions, and all trails became faint. We took a southwesterly course,

passed one or two cabins and came to the edge of civilization which was bounded on the west by the Des Moines river.

Father had visited this section in 1836, and had selected a claim west of the river some two miles, at the time beyond any land yet surveyed, and entirely out of the usual path of claim hunters. It was on the left bank of a creek which the Indians called Chequest, that empties into the Des Moines river some four miles below the sharp turn southward on the first curve of the great bend or "Ox bow." Our camp was made on the left bank of the river and exactly opposite the mouth of Chequest creek.* On the right bank and above the creek's mouth was the only cabin within the present limits of the State of Iowa west of the Des Moines river. It was built by Samuel Clayton in 1836; beyond it there was not one single human habitation, except those of the Indians. On that side of the river, above and below Chequest creek, and in the valley of the creek back from the river for miles was the Indian camp of Keokuk, numbering, I should think, seven hundred. Here, it is my distinct recollection, they were making sugar from the hard maples that thickly covered the banks of creek and river, though it hardly seems that the sap would have been running so late in the year. At least, it would not seem that they could have peeled the elm as early as the sap would run, though they must have done so for their sugar making was a thing I cannot be mistaken about. For years afterward we could see the marks they made on the trees. They had no augers nor "spiles" such as the settlers used, so they would take their tomahawks, cut the bark from the tree in the shape of the letter "V," the point being perhaps a foot below the upper parts which reached two-thirds of the way around the tree. A flat peg or chip was driven into the tree below the point of the "V," the flat side up and the outer end lower than that next the tree. The sap would come out from the

*Chequest creek rises in Davis county, runs southeastward into Van Buren county, and empties into the Des Moines river about three miles W. N. W. of Keosauqua.

bark, follow around to the chip, run out to its point and drop into the troughs. These troughs were ingeniously made. For years after the Indians had left, we would find elm poles from which they had been formed. They would cut a pole six or eight inches in diameter and about every two or three feet they would cut the bark in a zigzag way around the pole, so that when it was unrolled from the pole it would be a solid seamless strip say two feet long, with long, slender, pointed projections at the ends. These projections would be about a foot long, and about two inches wide at the body of the trough. These ends were drawn together by tough bark as tightly as possible, and this would curl up the bark to the size of the pole before it was stripped off, and would hold sometimes a couple of gallons of water. Of course the ends of the trough where they were puckered up, and occasionally a crack or hole through the body, would leak. To mend this, the Indians would take the inner bark of the slippery elm, beat it into a pulpy mass, and daub it into the cracks and openings, and this would make the whole thing water tight. They would gather the sap into storage troughs made, as their canoes were made, from the largest walnut trees. These they would make by cutting down the trees, taking off the bark and chipping off the upper side until it was flat and the size they wished the upper part of their trough to be. Then they would take coals and brands from their fires, lay them along the flat surface, burn the log a little then knock off the fire, put it out and with their tomahawks cut out the charred part. This they repeated until they would work out as fine a trough as could be made with the most improved modern tools. Their canoes were often made in fantastic shape, with walls so thin that they were as light as if made from bark. From 1836 to '40 there were many sugar troughs and hundreds of canoes in the woods and along the streams. I wonder that none of them were preserved.

It would interest the curious to see our party crossing the

Des Moines river on the 4th of April, 1836. No flatboats had been made, nor were there any other arrangements provided for crossing with anything more bulky or heavy than a man. Our camp on the left bank had attracted a large party of Indians, and their canoes were drawn up along the bank by dozens. I do not suppose they had ever seen a wagon, certainly never two at once, while the cover, the yoking of the cattle and the hitching of old "Jule" were all interesting to them. The river was too high and swift to ford; it would even have been dangerous to try to swim the cattle and "Jule" over. Father hit upon the plan of hiring a couple of the largest of the canoes, placing them side by side and lashing them together with puncheons placed crosswise over them; then taking everything out of the wagons and taking them apart the pieces were loaded on this craft and with the help of the Indians it was poled and paddled across. The last trip would have made a good picture. Indians and settlers; men, women and children; household goods, dogs, and finally "Jule," towed along, swimming in the water behind. But all were finally and safely landed.

The families were quartered in the Clayton cabin. The Claytons had seven in their family; our party nineteen; twenty-six souls were housed in great comfort in the one-roomed cabin.

During this week the men erected a cabin on our claim. Then for the last time that ox team was hitched to our moving wagon. It was a happy procession, and one I shall always remember. Every moment of that trip is a vivid recollection. Drawing up and away from the river on the gentle slope of the ridge formed by the breaks of Chequest creek and the Des Moines river, then along its crest where a path was traced by the hoof of deer and buffalo and the mocasin of Indian brave. No shod hoof, much less a wagon-tire had ever marked this road. How "Dick" and "Buck" crowded and hooked to get the advantage of the trail, while "Jule" switched along its easy, crooked line with a swing

and a stride that showed that she knew its meaning. For a few short miles, then off down to the left, through the sloping open woods, then out into an opening to a fresh, new, one-roomed cabin—HOME!

NEWSPAPER CHANGES.—In recent years there has been a marked tendency on the editorial pages of American newspapers to print more fun than was the custom in earlier times of grave and solemn treatment of weighty themes. A study of the daily journals of the country shows that the old traditions of exhortation and argument have been largely abandoned. Long dissertations have been almost entirely cast away. The epigram, the quip, the skit, the work of the pen that points lightly and never drags—these seem to be catching the fancy of the public and to be in favor in newspaper offices, while the ponderous essays are thrust into the waste paper basket or consigned to monthly or quarterly publications or to pamphlets prepared for a select constituency. It is not now meant to consider whether this radical change in general newspaper aims is in every way the wisest that could be conceived; but that it suits many present day readers and has swept over the country cannot be disputed. It is an interesting sign of the times. But it does not mean the necessary decline of the editorial page. On the contrary, journals which really stand for something, and know how to advocate it persuasively, candidly and with the simple directness the age demands, are still sought for—all the more, perhaps, because so many papers have been led away by the notion that even the intelligent public wants nothing but frivolity—and fustian.—*N. Y. Daily Tribune, Nov. 2, 1902.*

THE Secretary of the Treasury recommends that the relative value of gold and silver be so changed as to make silver of more value proportionately than it is at present.—*Bellevue (Iowa) Democrat, Jan. 28, 1852.*

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